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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HO CHI MINH CITY 000038

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS, DRL/IRF AND DRL/AWH

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TAGS: [KIRF](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [SCUL](#) [VM](#)
SUBJECT: CHRISTIANS HOLD WIDESPREAD CHRISTMAS CELEBRATIONS IN
VIETNAM

REF: A) HANOI 007 B) 09 HCMC 650 C) 09 HCMC 034

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CLASSIFIED BY: Kenneth J. Fairfax, Consul General, U.S.
Consulate General Ho Chi Minh City, Department of State.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Christians in HCMC, Hanoi and other locations held several large-scale Christmas celebrations with record-breaking turnout and without incident. In HCMC, Protestant house churches staged their largest Christmas gatherings to date -- two separate events involving 40,000 and 12,000 followers. Two other large-scale Christmas events were held in Northern and Central Vietnam with 2,500 and 4,000 participants, respectively. For the first time, Catholics in Northern Son La province were permitted to hold Christmas mass in three separate cities, marking a thaw in relations between the church and local officials. Officially sanctioned churches also held routine Christmas services. Some unrecognized groups in "sensitive areas" reported problems obtaining authorization to hold gatherings. Government officials attended several sanctioned religious celebrations and called on church leaders to perform their "patriotic duty to develop the country." HCMC's Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) reported to ConGenOffs that "Christmas has become a festival for all people" in Ho Chi Minh City. End summary.

Catholics: Trendlines Are in Our Favor

[1](#)2. (C) Southern Catholic leaders report that despite recent tensions over property issues between the GVN and the Catholic Church, Catholics throughout the South celebrated Christmas openly and without incident. Meanwhile, for the first time, Catholics in the Northwest Highland province of Son La were also allowed to hold Christmas mass at unofficial meeting points in three different cities. In the south, Catholics reported positive trends in their relationship with the GVN, including receiving permission to host the Episcopal Association of Asian Bishops' Conference in Vietnam in 2009 -- a first. The conference focused on strategies to expand and promote the Church's role in education, even though the GVN does not allow the Catholics to play a formal role in education in Vietnam. Our Catholic Church contacts in HCMC also said that GVN officials supported the launch of the jubilee year celebrating the 350th anniversary of the Church in Vietnam.

[1](#)3. (U) Befitting the warming relationship between the Vatican and the GVN, the official press reported many official calls by high-ranking officials to the Catholic leadership in Ho Chi Minh

City and surrounding areas. Deputy PM Truong Vinh Trong, HCMC Party Secretary Le Thanh Hai, and HCMC People's Committee Chairman Le Quang Quan highlighted the list of officials who called on Cardinal Pham Minh Man before Christmas. Minister of Public Security Le Hong Anh paid a Christmas call at the Long Xuyen Bishop's Office in An Giang province, and representatives of the HCMC Communist Party, People's Committee, and Fatherland Front paid courtesy calls on Father Nguyen Cong Dan, Chairman of the Catholic Solidarity Committee.

40,000 Gather in the 'Burbs

¶4. (C) The largest Christmas gathering took place in a vacant lot in Go Vap, an outlying district of Ho Chi Minh City, on December 11. It was organized by the five member churches of the Vietnam Evangelical Fellowship (VEF): the nationally recognized Southern Baptist Church, the nationally registered Assemblies of God, and three unregistered churches (United Presbyterian Church, United Gospel, and the Full Gospel Church).

Some 40,000 followers gathered to celebrate Christmas under an enormous neon sign proclaiming "JESUS!" According to church members in attendance, the crowd included 8,000 new converts. Church leaders had hoped to hold the gathering in a large stadium downtown (as they had done in past years), but reportedly were turned down a few weeks before the event by HCMC authorities, who cited concerns over crowd control and traffic gridlock. While city authorities initially tried to steer the event to a very small (3,000 seat) stadium in distant Cu Chi district, when organizers came back with the counter-proposal for temporarily converting a vacant lot into a gathering site the city agreed. Despite the fact that 40,000 people showed up -- more than a dozen times the 3,000 the city listed on the permit -- the event proceeded smoothly. It was even reported fairly positively in the state-controlled press and religious websites overseas, most notably the Christian Broadcast Network and Compass Direct, which trumpeted the news of the event as

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"historic" and "unprecedented."

¶5. (C) Six days after the event in HCMC, Protestant house churches in Hanoi held the largest ever Protestant celebration in the capital with 12,000 individuals participating. Central CRA officials authorized the event and allowed yet unrecognized house churches to sponsor the event in downtown Hanoi at My Dinh stadium. Jackson Family Ministries from the U.S. provided inspiring musical numbers as did a choir from Korea. According to church members in attendance, the crowd included 2,000 new converts. The service concluded with prayers for the nation and Vietnam's leaders. In a separate event, Northern Nam Dinh province hosted the Evangelical Church of Vietnam North's annual Christmas celebration, where some 2,500 Protestants gathered to celebrate and in Central Vietnam, Tuy Hoa, an additional gathering of 4,000 occurred the day after Christmas.

Recognized Protestants: All OK Except in "Sensitive" Areas

¶6. (C) The Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV), the largest sanctioned Protestant group, reported few problems related to their Christmas celebrations. Congregations in the Central Highlands also held celebrations without incident. One exception to the generally positive trend was in the Delta province of Tra Vinh, where both recognized and unrecognized Protestant congregations in predominantly Khmer areas reported to us that they continue to face discrimination from local authorities and Buddhist residents. Local authorities did not

respond to an application for one Tra Vinh congregation to hold Christmas services, but did not stop or interrupt the unapproved celebrations, according to one SECV church leader. Authorities also ordered one congregation to remove a cross and a Catholic flag from their church, but followers refused and did not suffer any repercussions.

17. (C) The only other sanctioned Protestant congregation reporting any difficulties was the Ninh Kieu District branch of the recently registered Assembly of God (AOG) church in Can Tho City. Local authorities told AOG leaders they could not gather more than 10 members and turned down their registration, insisting that they submit an accompanying list of followers. AOG received national registration in October 2009 and expects to be officially recognized this year after they elect their Executive Board at their first General Assembly later this fall.

Recognition could make it easier for their congregations to negotiate with authorities in the future. Pastor Stephen Doan Trung Tin, head of the Good News Mission Church, reported that four ethnic Hmong congregations in the Ea Sup, Krong Pak, and Ea Hleo Districts of Dak Lak province were not allowed to gather for Christmas services (Note: these districts have been the historical center of many ethnic minority land-rights protests and property disputes. End note). Pastor Pham Toan Ai of the United Baptist Church also reported that two congregations in the Long Hung and Tan Phu Districts of neighboring Dong Nai province had been asked not to celebrate Christmas publicly and to gather only in family groups. They were allowed to gather, however, after Pastor Ai raised the issue with the provincial CRA.

18. (C) Comment: Christmas 2009 -- characterized by increasingly routine Christmas services celebrated by a wide variety of Christian groups and attended by a growing cadre of Vietnamese officials -- reflects the trend of increasing tolerance of the practice of religion across the South and in others areas of Vietnam. In pre-holiday meetings with ConGenOffs, CRA officials went to some length to stress that Christmas was a holiday for "all." These officials promised to ensure all denizens of HCMC could celebrate a secular or religious Christmas -- so long as they obeyed the law and complied with safety and traffic codes. Skeptical Protestant house church leaders have argued that their emphasis on "law and order" translates into support for certain (sanctioned) religious groups over others, resulting in stricter regulations on unsanctioned Protestants in an effort to curb their growth and influence, especially in ethnic minority areas.

While Vietnam has a long way to go in terms of religious freedom, our discussions with Christians across the board reveal a consensus that the overall conditions for religious freedom are improving. End comment.

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